

Yolo Basin Foundation Op-Ed Regarding the Bay Delta Conservation Plan
*(This opinion piece appeared in the Davis Enterprise on 4/26/09 as
"Spring Flooding Imperils Bypass.")*

Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater! A measure contained in the Bay Delta Conservation Plan (BDCP) would do just that if it isn't modified.

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta ecosystem is in trouble. Governor Schwarzenegger has assembled an army of agency leaders, staff and consultants with the goal of solving the Delta ecosystem crisis and providing guaranteed water to Southern California people and farms before he leaves office. "Delta Vision," published in November 2008, is the outcome of their effort, and the BDCP is a complex multi-party plan to carry out the goals of "Delta Vision" within the context of the state and federal endangered species acts.

A model for solving the Delta's problems exists here in Yolo County--the 16,000-acre Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, and the partnerships it was founded on. Instead of incorporating this successful model, policy makers are on their way to undoing 20 years of community effort to create and manage this amazing public resource.

The Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, owned and operated by the CA Department of Fish and Game, exemplifies the power of diverse interests working together, and its success is possible because of widespread community and agency support that is based on a long running grassroots effort. It exists within the flood control function of the Bypass; it contributes to the agricultural economy of Yolo County; and it is an open space jewel for the regional community, all while providing a healthy, diverse wetlands ecosystem. The fact that the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area is located adjacent to the State Capitol means it is accessible to a large metropolitan population, and its impact on building a community environmental ethic should not be underestimated.

The BDCP proposes to construct a notch in the Fremont Weir in order to prolong spring flooding, fundamentally changing how the Bypass works. The Fremont Weir currently diverts up to 500,000 cubic feet per second of water into the Yolo Bypass when the Sacramento River reaches flood stage. The proposed modification would be used to flood the Bypass for a 45 day period between January and May in most years.

This proposal is based on studies that compared the health of young ocean-going salmon that were carried by floodwaters into the Bypass with similar smolts caught in the Sacramento River. The fish that migrated via the Bypass showed signs of being healthier than those that migrated through the channelized Sacramento River. It is hypothesized that the difference is based on time spent in the shallow waters of the Yolo Bypass floodplain.

While this proposed measure may improve the survival chances for some young salmon in a few more years than currently happens, it is only one among many actions that need to be completed to improve salmon survival throughout their life cycle to the ocean and back. The Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area Land Management Plan contains five other actions to improve conditions for salmon and other native fish without notching the Fremont Weir. A copy of the plan can be found on the Yolo Basin Foundation's website: www.yolobasin.org.

Increased frequency and duration of spring flooding will have a serious impact on agriculture and habitat management in the Yolo Bypass, tipping the balance toward inviability. The extensive rice growing operations in the Bypass provide millions of dollars of income that contributes to the vibrant Yolo County agriculture economy as well as valuable habitat for water birds. The Yolo County Agriculture Commission estimates that the combination of rice and other crops plus ranching in the Yolo Bypass creates about \$44 million in direct farm income annually.

Rice farmers need to start preparing the ground and planting rice starting in March. There are already years in which spring flooding prevents this field work and the rice acreage decreases significantly. Increased spring flooding makes nearly every year a bad year for Bypass farmers and the habitat benefits they provide.

Agriculture, including ranching, is fully integrated into the management of the Wildlife Area. With the involvement of the Dixon Resource Conservation District, agricultural activities help Fish and Game fulfill their habitat goals while generating important income for the operation of the Wildlife Area. This income is what makes it possible for the Wildlife Area to be open to the public and managed in a way that creates and sustains diverse habitat.

Spring flooding is problematic in other ways. Floodwaters that linger into spring encourage the growth of tules, cattails, and willows which left unmanaged will slow down the movement of floodwaters. This proliferation of emergent vegetation reduces the ability of the Yolo Bypass to move floodwaters away from urban areas as designed. Late spring flooding also adversely affects the success of ground nesting birds because the growth of grasses that provide cover is delayed.

Yolo Basin Foundation, the nonprofit associated with the Wildlife Area, is working to deliver the message to the members of the BDCP Steering Committee that there are other measures available to improve aquatic habitat for fish while sustaining the existing high quality mosaic of farm fields and wetlands. We are encouraging them to work with us to develop a set of actions that builds upon the success of the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area and honors current management underway on public and private lands throughout the Yolo Bypass.

We also urge the citizens of Yolo County to weigh in on the BDCP effort by expressing support for the protection of the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area and the values it represents. The BDCP EIR/EIS scoping process is open for public comment until May 14th. For information on how to submit comments go to <http://www.resources.ca.gov/bdcp/>.

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